

The Construction of the Supernatural in Two Screen Adaptations of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

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W*uthering Heights* by Emily Brontë is one of the favourite Victorian novels for screen adaptation, with a long list of versions that started in 1920 with a British silent film directed by A. V. Bramble, and includes several recent adaptations. With both British and American productions, the list alternates between cinema and television films or serials, this being a reason why I have chosen for this paper one adaptation made for the cinema — the classic Hollywood version in black and white, directed by William Wyler and released in 1939 — and one British TV film, directed by David Skynner and released in 1998. The long time span between these versions — of about sixty years — as well as the fact that one was made in the United States and the other in the United Kingdom, one for the cinema and the other for television, may help explain their dissimilar ways of constructing the supernatural dimension of the adapted novel. The different temporal, social, and geographic contexts of production may allow for a comparative study within a cultural critique, since I agree with Jennifer M. Jeffers's words in defence of a cultural critique in adaptation studies:

We need to be especially vigilant in our critique, not of the film's fidelity to the literary text, but of the various decisions made *en route* from the language text to film text, and the important economic, political, historical, and cultural issues involved in the transformation. (Cutchins 123)

This is a viewpoint both shared and emphasized by many recent books and articles on Adaptation Studies, namely by Deborah Cartmell in *Screen Adaptation. Impure Cinema*, in which she mentions the so-called “sociological turn” in Adaptation Studies (21), Timothy Corrigan in the essay “Literature on Screen, a History: in the Gap”, underlining the

“potential for adaptation to challenge traditional disciplinary boundaries” as well as the importance of “more exact cultural and historical investigation” (Cartmell, *Literature on Screen* 41), and also Hila Sachar in *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature*, and Kamilla Elliott in *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*.

This perspective is now being often applied to film adaptations of literary classics, including both the “prestige films” made in Hollywood in the mid-twentieth century and the British “heritage films” of the two last decades of the same century. *Wuthering Heights* is one of the novels whose adaptations are being approached within this vein, with the analysis of themes deemed central and recurrent in the novel. The theme of “home”, for example, is analysed in detail by Hila Sachar, namely concerning Wyler’s adaptation, which she classifies as “cinema of spectacle” (39), relating it to the historical and cultural background of the epoch in which it was produced — an epoch signalled by the beginning of the Second World War.

Yet one feature which, being also central to the novel by Emily Brontë, has notwithstanding been mostly neglected in the analysis of film adaptations, is the presence of the supernatural, that is, the metaphysical dimension which Terry Eagleton recognized to be paradigmatic of the dialectical vision in the novel, by arguing: “It is a function of the metaphysical to preserve those possibilities which a society cancels, to act as its reservoir of unrealised value. That is the history of Heathcliff and Catherine” (120).

1. The Classic Hollywood adaptation of 1939

In his seminal work entitled *Novels Into Film*, first published in 1957, George Bluestone was one of the few authors who addressed this theme, comparing its presence in the novel with the treatment given to it in the Hollywood adaptation of 1939. According to this author, both protagonists are modified in the film in order to come closer to the profile of the conventional heroes of that epoch. In Catherine’s case her social and materialistic motivation is obviously accentuated, by means of her strong attraction to the glamour of the balls and parties given at the Grange and which the film depicts repeatedly and in detail. Besides, her insistence on Heathcliff’s departure to seek fortune abroad makes her a more materialistic

woman, diminishing the importance of her spiritual identification with him.

As for Heathcliff, the motif of demonism and violence is here almost unrelieved, with Laurence Olivier's performance bringing him closer to the conventional romantic hero of melodramas than to the violent "Ghoul" or "Afreet" that Charlotte Brontë saw in the protagonist of her sister's novel. Furthermore, in the brief closing shot which Wyler was forced to add to the film by his producers (Brosh 44), we only see the back of Cathy's and Heathcliff's ghosts walking along hand in hand, in a blurred outline. The image of peace and beatitude attainable in a spiritual after-life is here reduced to a static and very brief shot, which, as a result, leads to the impression condensed in Bluestone's following words: "Emily Brontë's magic is gone" (105).

To these commentaries we should also add the deliberate ambiguity of all the references made to ghosts in this version. Indeed, in one of the first scenes, Mr. Lockwood is awoken by the noise of a bough tipping on the windowpane of the room in *Wuthering Heights* where he is sleeping. When he stands up and puts his hand out of the window, he feels someone grasping it, but he, just like the spectators, can only hear the voice of a girl and cannot see anyone. His interpretation of the incident, which the spectators are supposed to share, is that he just "had a dream" and this allows him to go on to declare: "I don't believe in ghosts".

Later on, on Catherine and Edgar Linton's wedding-day, a scene was added in which Catherine, outside the church and already married, says that she is feeling a "cold wind", which sounds like a foreboding of tragedy, a feeling intensified by a close-up of Ellen with a fearful expression. However, the doubt as to the presence of a spiritual or extra-sensorial dimension is again aroused when Heathcliff, who had just returned from America, appears with the outward aspect and outfit of a gentleman and is referred to as being "a ghost". The term "ghost" is thus deprived of its supernatural meaning, this being a subtle way of deconstructing the idea of the real existence of ghosts. And when, after Cathy's death, Heathcliff begs her to haunt him, and this seems to be actually happening, Ellen, again in a close-up, makes the following ambiguous commentary: "Not her ghost, but her love".

On the whole, we may conclude that the construction of the supernatural in this adaptation is reduced to a small number of very ambivalent

suggestions, dispensing with the ingredients that the critic John Gassner, in a work published in 1943, considered to be: “The Gothic hugger-mugger and exaggerations of the book that was born in the fevered brain of a brilliant recluse” (Bluestone 111).

These changes may be seen as a strategy of the film-makers to turn the events into something understandable to a mid-twentieth century audience. It is important to notice that, notwithstanding, and certainly owing to its dark and wild sceneries, the film was then considered “too heavy” by the majority of the public, being marketed as a Gothic romance (Sadoff 79).

In order to understand both the film-makers strategies and the audiences’ reaction at the time the film was released, we must bear in mind the historical fact that Europe was then at war, and the United States were still in the so-called Depression-era. And, as Liora Brosh underlines, films made in a period of recession, in which audiences were economically deprived, tended to produce escapist fantasies based on riches, material splendour and glamour (29).

This is no doubt visible in Wyler’s *Wuthering Heights*, in which, rejecting the desolate place where she was born, the female protagonist is shown seeking wealth and social status above all. Her spiritual union with Heathcliff, both before and after her death, is clearly minimized, thus making the supernatural dimension so diffused as to become almost inexistent. Furthermore, as George Bluestone and Liora Brosh have emphasized, this film seems to have a political agenda, being meant to support the British in the war, by presenting the characters in a favourable light. Besides, and unlike in the novel, where this is left vague, it is specifically in America that Heathcliff makes his fortune, America being thus presented as the egalitarian culture that enables him to rise (Brosh 36).

2. The British TV adaptation of 1998

This classic and iconic adaptation, with all these ideological marks, has undoubtedly influenced most of the subsequent screen adaptations, with some exceptions, in which we may include the British ITV’s film directed by David Skynner and released in 1998 — one version in which, as I argue, the supernatural dimension is constructed in a very dissimilar

way, resulting in a less dubious and a more emphatic presence.

The difference may be noticed almost from the beginning, namely in the crucial initial scene in which Lockwood is suddenly awoken by the sound of a branch breaking the windowpane. When he stretches his arm out of the window and feels his hand grasped by someone, he not only can hear a girl's voice, but he can see her as well. Both the spectators and Lockwood are confronted with the materialization of a young girl who cries and insistently begs him: "Let me in, let me in!" The spectator will recognize this face as being Catherine's as a child, in the sequences of the long flashback relating to her and Heathcliff's childhood in the moors of *Wuthering Heights*. Catherine's ghost is, therefore, visually represented from the start, which makes it appear as something more real to Lockwood and to the spectators.

The use of image to suggest the presence of the transcendent and spiritual, interacting with the material and corporeal world, pervades this adaptation, namely through the overlapping of images of the past within the present and vice-versa. The suggestion behind these glimpses, neatly presented to the spectators, seems to be the relativity of time dimension — as if the past, the present and the future could be simultaneous, this being liable to be interpreted as an allusion to Einstein's theories about spacetime.

On the other hand, the Gothic atmosphere in this version is not reduced to the scenery, being instead accentuated by the intensity of passions and violence, especially in the sequences after Catherine's death, culminating in the scene in which Heathcliff goes to a graveyard during the night and unburies her corpse, embracing it in a paroxysm of passion and pain. The macabre character of this scene, as well as the violent outbursts of Heathcliff's revenge, including the rape of Edgar's sister, all this given by Robert Cavanah's wild performance, make it akin to a horror film — a genre that became very popular in the last decade of the twentieth century, with a return to classic Gothic ghosts, whose dangers were more psychological than physical, as for example in the film *Sixth Sense* (1999). As Dianne F. Sadoff states in her book on Victorian Vogue: "The 1990s literary gothic horror film sought to benefit from the 1980s heritage boom by targeting a niche audience of worried independent cinema fans eager to enjoy quality period vampires (...)" (104).

This attraction to the weird and the uncanny helps explain the frequency with which certain nineteenth-century novels were then adapted to the screen, small or big. From the monsters of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* to freaks like Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* or Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, all were privileged focuses in films whose aesthetics always comes more or less close to the Gothic.

Within a cultural critique, these Gothic features must be approached bearing in mind the historical and sociological pressures of this period, by connecting them with the specific anxieties of the late twentieth century. We must recall that not only a century but also a millennium were then coming to a close, accompanied by insistent apocalyptic predictions and also by a technological revolution that was increasingly disrupting the traditional means of human communication.

Spectatorial greed for strong emotions, which seems to have characterized audiences from that period to the present day, should actually be seen as a result of a need to exorcize the uncertainties, fears and anxieties of daily life, by plunging into a virtual world which, being still more violent and excessive, may function as a sort of Aristotelian *catharsis*. Quoting Maria Beville in her analysis of the connection between the Gothic and Postmodernism, we may argue that: "Terror remains a connecting and potent link between the Gothic and the postmodern" (9). Indeed, the turbulent landscapes, the terror caused by demonised or ghostly characters, the unrepresentable aspects of reality and subjectivity, which are usually pointed out as being paradigmatic of a Gothic aesthetics, are all distinct features of many films of our age, including this film made in Britain at the end of the twentieth century.

But we should not forget that, this being a film for television, it also raises other specific issues, namely concerning the notion that TV adaptations may contribute to the mission of public service and are generally seen as closely related to the so-called heritage film, by showing an evident interest in British classics. The tendency of television adaptations towards fidelity to the literary sources may no doubt be explained by this double purpose: not only to entertain, but also to educate.

In the case of the 1998 ITV adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, fidelity to the source novel is signalled in the title of the film, which

includes the name of the novel's author: *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights*. It may also be verified in its length, which allows for the encompassing of the whole plot, including the second generation of characters, which had been omitted in Wyler's version. On the other hand, we must reckon that since the turn of the century the concept of fidelity has been reconfigured and, as Sarah Cardwell claims: "Adapters have become more concerned with conveying the 'spirit' of the source text. Adaptations have become more courageous and imaginative" (Cartmell, *Literature on Screen* 193).

This opinion may already be applied to David Skynner's options in directing his adaptation of Emily Brontë's novel. Even though he was faithful to the plot, characters and dialogue of the source text, he also uses technological and expressive tools that make this version a clear product of postmodernity at the turn of the century — especially, as I have already underlined, concerning its construction of the supernatural.

The comparison of the film version of 1939 with this 1998 TV adaptation does lead us to agree with Terry Eagleton when he observed: "*Wuthering Heights* has been alternately read as a social and a metaphysical novel" (120). In effect, the emphasis on the social dynamics as a pole of attraction that we find in the former version is replaced, in the latter one, by an emphasis on the metaphysical. And the explanation for the different focuses can certainly be found in the co-related historical and cultural contexts, each film reflecting the sensibility, anxieties and aspirations of the epoch in which they were made and of the respective target audiences.

From the analysis of the more recent adaptation, we may infer that in this global and postmodern age, with its excessive materialistic consumption, and especially since the turn of the century, there seems to be a need for alternative imaginary worlds. Instead of riches or social glamour, the escapist fantasies are nowadays often configured by worlds inhabited by ghosts or vampires. With all the terror they arouse, these supernatural entities still allow for a thrilling and consoling expectation: that, after all, there may be a life beyond this life.

Moreover, and to conclude, we may also see them as an illustration of a very ancient belief, which is reflected, for example, in the famous words pronounced by Hamlet after the appearance of his father's ghost, when he insinuates: "There are more things in heaven and earth (...) / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (Shakespeare 195).

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ABSTRACT

Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë is one of the favourite Victorian novels for screen adaptation, with a long list of versions that started in 1920 with a British silent film directed by A. V. Bramble, and includes several recent adaptations. With both British and American productions, the list alternates between cinema and television films or serials, this being a reason why I have chosen one adaptation made for the cinema — the classic Hollywood version directed by William Wyler and released in 1939 — and one British TV film, directed by David Skynner and released in 1998.

The long time span between these versions — of about sixty years — as well as the fact that one was made in the United States and the other in Britain, one for the cinema and the other for television, may allow for a cultural critique based on the acknowledgement of different temporal, social and geographic contexts of production.

The presence of the supernatural is one feature which, being central in the novel, has notwithstanding been mostly neglected in the analysis of film adaptations. This paper will, therefore, focus on the construction of the supernatural in both films, relating the different approaches to their respective cultural contexts.

KEYWORDS

Supernatural; cultural critique; cinema; television

RESUMO

Wuthering Heights de Emily Brontë é um dos romances mais adaptados ao ecrã, com uma longa lista de versões iniciada em 1920 com um filme mudo realizado por A. V. Bramble, e que apresenta várias adaptações recentes. Incluindo produções inglesas e norte-americanas, a lista alterna entre filmes para cinema ou filmes e séries para televisão, sendo este um dos motivos pelos quais escolhi uma adaptação para o cinema — a clássica versão de Hollywood realizada por William Wyler

e estreada em 1939 — e o filme para televisão realizado por David Skyner e estreado em 1998.

O grande hiato temporal entre as duas versões — de cerca de sessenta anos — bem como o facto de uma ter sido feita em Hollywood e a outra na Grã-Bretanha, uma para o cinema e a outra para televisão, podem viabilizar uma crítica cultural baseada no reconhecimento de diferentes contextos de produção sob o ponto de vista temporal, social e geográfico.

A presença do sobrenatural é um aspecto que, embora sendo central no romance, tem sido geralmente negligenciado na análise das adaptações fílmicas. Por essa razão, este artigo debruça-se sobre a construção do sobrenatural em ambos os filmes, relacionando as diferentes abordagens com os respectivos contextos culturais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Sobrenatural; crítica cultural; cinema; televisão
